



**A Few Thoughts On A Shooting Inside  
of a  
Post Office In Memphis From Some  
Time Ago**

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## **A Few Thoughts On A Shooting Inside of a Post Office In Memphis From Some Time Ago**

I'm going to talk about a shooting that happened in Memphis, and I don't remember when the shooting happened, at least a year ago by now, and I'm not planning on citing any articles and doing any extra reading on the topic past what I remember from the arbitration case I listened to which involved the party at the heart of the shooting because I'm not going to talk about the shooting in those terms - I won't be attempting to find the shooter's motivation or analyze his life and social media presence - so I may leave some details of the event seemingly arbitrarily vague or use subjective terms of measurement instead of hard numbers, purely as an attempt to not give any wrong information. With that in mind I hope you'll forgive me a few semantic mix ups.

At least a year ago by now, a shooting was carried out inside of a Memphis post office involving the death of two supervisors, and one employee, the latter dying by suicide. I don't know any of their names - this is one of those moments where I keep extremely public and easily found information vague because I want to base my argument on conjecture - I don't even know if their names are public knowledge. The employee, as you could guess, was the one that carried out the shooting, he was a 'CCA' - the post office's title for temporary employees, a mailman apprentice if you will - as am I at the moment, he was in his mid-to-late twenties, as am I.

The shooter came back to the post office mid-workday, looking for a specific manager that he had an altercation with earlier in the day for forgetting mail and who threatened to write him up (most likely applying a tone to his voice that a considerate person wouldn't even use on a dog) if he brought back mail. The CCA asked what he should do when it gets dark outside, which was what prompted the supervisor to threaten him with a write up. Maybe the most absolutely maddening quality of postal work is the almost perpetual string of conflicting orders; don't compromise your own safety (because that will just lead to an attempt at discipline), but if you bring any mail back you're getting

disciplined, or get your route done in eight hours, and when you tell them your route's going to take nine hours that day and you ask what they want you to do with the extra hour, and they say a bunch of bureaucratic nonsense which essentially means '*I don't care man, I'm out of here at noon*'. The CCA returned to the office a second time to shoot the station manager, who was out supervising a different carrier on their route at the time, so instead he shot and killed two other managers, and then took his own life inside the postal facility.

The grievance that formed the basis for the arbitration case I listened to stated that management local to Memphis was at fault for the shooting for harboring a work environment toxic enough to *drive* a person to do something as horrible as double-homicide. USPS management's reputation of being horrible is fairly well known, doubly so for the toxic work environment of the postal service itself. At the time of my writing this, I've been a letter carrier for a year and a half - I like the offices in my city, I like the majority of my bosses and coworkers, and I actually *truly* enjoy my job, and in spite of all of that the post office's work environment manages to physically make me ill on a daily basis.

A bit of anecdotal evidence on my experience at the post office; my dad's been a mailman in the same city as me for twenty-five years, almost all of my coworkers, if not know my dad well, at least know what he looks like and who he is. When I started as a mailman and was unfamiliar with the culture (and was unfamiliar with work culture in general, having been unemployed for three years prior), I would wave at, say hi to, smile at, and attempt to strike up conversations with every coworker I passed, just simple personability. I did that for about a month until I realized that only about ten percent responded to me positively, while about seventy percent of my coworkers would altogether completely ignore my existence, as if they couldn't feel me smiling daggers at them as we passed one another. Eventually I began looking straight ahead, not actually seeing anything, so as to preemptively avoid the embarrassment of being ignored. And still, I've worked with the same people for nearly two years, and I will only strike up conversation with maybe five of them, because I can only confidently rely on five of my coworkers to give me a positive response. The face that I show, and

that I assume the majority of my coworkers show, to our customers when contrasted with the reality of the interoffice culture has the largest gap of any customer service job I can think of. When I'm on the street, physically delivering mail, I smile at everyone, go out of my way to talk to them, am extremely cordial and amenable, and then when I get back to the office I keep my head down, refuse to talk to anyone unless they talk to me first, and contort my face in a way to make me look unapproachable - and again, I *like* the vast majority of my coworkers, I can talk to almost any of them and enjoy the conversation, most of them have still, however, lost my respect at one point or another after overhearing them propagate the passive-aggressive, cliquy, high school like culture within the office.

The case file for the grievance stated that the shooter had been verbally reprimanded that day for forgetting mail - something trivial and easily solved with a two-to-ten-minute drive to the office and back, something that I have been guilty of doing a handful of times and was greeted with sly laughter from my supervisor at worst. After the arbitration process a number of Memphis' local management were barred from ever managing postal employees in any capacity, anywhere - a punishment that has been known to be passed down in cases of extreme negligence on management's part.

As a person who is against murder in basically any and every capacity, I'm going to do something that I have often denigrated others for, play the devil's advocate - informed from the perspective of the american laborer. I won't defend the shooter in any way or attempt to absolve him of his sin, because personally I have no inclination to, instead I'm going to paint a picture of the average American's relationship to their employment.

The majority of Americans are living paycheck-to-paycheck, and have been for decades, literally one paycheck from homelessness. Thanks to the state's rights, social programs vary greatly depending on where you live geographically, and obviously by-and-large are objectively worse in the midwest and the south (where I and the shooter live). The majority of America is "at-will-employment", meaning that an employee can quit or get fired at any time for any reason (the

latter obviously being the most detrimental), unless of course the reason is illegal (which is easily gotten around) or if you are a part of a labor union that fights for your job - employers and business owners are ever busy lobbying congress to pass laws like the “right-to-work” (which passed in my state and Tennessee) to curtail the power of labor unions, and to repeal laws and dissolve government agencies which get in the way of their ability to control their labor force like the ADA and the EEOC respectively. None of this will come as a surprise to most people, the symbiotic relationship between government and the private-sector owner class is so widely understood among Americans that it’s usually spoken about as just a pesky annoyance, something you’re so well acquainted with that you have to be reminded of it.

Indiana, my state, is famous for having some of the most regressive laws in the country, rivaling only Texas; stories about having to get drug tested for government assistance, people who live in low-income housing, making ten dollars an hour being told they make *too much* money for food stamps, having customer service representatives when you apply for unemployment who act more like claims adjusters that get paid twice what the average american does just to find a way to *not* give you the money that the federal government decided a long time ago was a necessary expense for the good of the country as a whole. I live two blocks down from a homeless shelter, I volunteered there *once*, they had a seven o’clock bedtime or they’d be locked out, summer or winter. Our minimum wage is *maybe* fifty cents above the federal minimum, less than eight dollars an hour. With the ever-increasing cost-of-living, slashing of social spending, the targeted crippling of labor unions and organizations on the verge of unionizing - not to mention the failings of the federal government to allow insurance to be tied with ones employment, their refusal to nationalize monopolies, their complete lack of interference while private equity firms sweep through the country systematically buying residential properties and making them unaffordable for the surrounding class of homeowners, artificially creating the burgeoning housing crisis - the veil shrouding the link between our employment status and our ability to live is ever-thinning.

The easy majority of insured Americans are insured through their employer, how many millions of Americans depend on their employer-sponsored health insurance for their medicine, who, if uninsured, would be forced to go without because they wouldn't be able to afford to pay for their price-gouged medications out of pocket? How many diabetics are actively going without insulin, and still working a full time job? How many millions of young Americans weren't fortunate enough to be born into a financially supportive family unit, and have to choose what bill to put off anytime an unexpected expenditure comes up? How many millions of Americans would, after a single missed pay-period, *have* to go into debt to afford the basic necessities of life, food, and shelter? In the midwest, our winters are getting harsher and more unpredictable; homelessness is on the rise, and so too is the number of people freezing to death every year.

When you consider all of the contingencies that come with a sudden loss of employment, all of the tools and services essential to survival that become wholly unavailable the moment you're unable to pay for it, one cannot help but flip this reality upside down; if I need this to survive, I am bound to this. Millions of Americans are still carrying around debt from before they were old enough to drink, mainly for something as noble as wanting to get an education, and thus have to remain employed at all times under threat of having their rights to property ownership stripped and repossessed. The owner classes will argue that all abuses of labor and minimizations of wages are allowable as long as there are other jobs their employees can aspire to; which is logically flawed in quite a few ways. The first being that the "at will employment" attitude cannot exist on a universal scale; if every employer were to take the same ideological approach to running their business, and they all thought they were able to get away with wage gouging because their employees have the *choice* to stay or leave, they effectively don't have a choice. If you as a business owner, deal with *every* complaint from *every* employee by telling them to get a better job, you're essentially admitting that your business is not a viable job for anyone to have - if all of your employees were to just find another job anytime they noticed something that needed improved, you would go out of business or run out of people to hire. More

obviously, the “*if you don't like your job then get a new one*” philosophy is literally just impossible for some; maybe you only have one employer in your town that offers insurance, you have to walk to work and nothing else is close to you, you don't have the skills training or formal education for other jobs in your area because both of those require access to resources that have never been available to you. Any position one holds that has full societal implications should be prepared to deal with all of the possible contingencies and those that don't should not be seriously considered.

As a whole the idea that we have the freedom to “choose” work is proven false the moment that it becomes needed for your survival. If the “choice” is between your job or freezing to death with an empty stomach, then there really isn't any kind of choice involved. A friend of mine whose name I won't mention is currently employed at Firestone as a mechanic under the most sinister of terms. When my friend got hired two years ago, the job came with a sign-on bonus, we'll say it was a thousand dollars to make the number round even though it was more like two-thousand, if you stayed for a predetermined number of months (and it might have only taken one month) under the fine-lined condition that you're obligated to pay it back if you quit, with the amount to be owed back decreasing an *undetermined* amount every work day. This kind of debt-based-employment is a new, but actually not new at all, form of coerced employment. The ‘loan-repayment-business-model’ has become an ever-increasingly used tactic among businesses with poor labor practices, not only just to lure in the desperate under class workers, whom are already allowing themselves to be manipulated, they've already been coerced into selling their labor under threat of starvation, but now they can ensure their continued exploitation over the next year or two - just up until you think you've worked for them long enough to deserve a raise, then they're hoping you quit so they can trap the next desperate twenty year old. These are pretty obvious cases of debt-bondage that won't get regulated out of existence until the terms become so unreasonable they start passing through generations again. As of right now, however, the terms of my friend's employment are by no means the average for most of America, but it does give us the chance to compare

his situation (which most reasonable people would admit is coercive employment, a bait-and-switch) in terms of our own employers. If my friend has to remain employed under the threat of going a thousand dollars into debt *before* including every other expenditure that piles up when you lose your main source of income, then the only true difference between him being forced to stay at his job and the majority of the working class being forced to stay at *their* jobs is a thousand dollars, or however much debt his employer offered him.

At what point do we start to consider threats against one's employment as threats against their lives? If I am required to have something to survive, and you threaten to strip me of it, you are effectively trying to kill me, or at the very least apathetic to the possibility of my death. When I was going through my training with the post office, each of my seven trainers stressed to me in detail how trigger-happy management is with firing new hires in their probationary employment period. Once you're out of probation and thus entitled to union protection, management's ability to fire you on a whim gets cut, even as the fear of being fired remains. When you live in a constant state of anxiety about losing your source of income, does it not make sense that eventually you would fall, or snap, into survival mode? The majority of my working life I spent working for small-business-owners (if you've never worked for a small business, let me be the first to break it to - the far majority of them aren't the archetypal ma' and pop' operation that we've been fed by the television) who aren't accountable to anyone but themselves and the negligent few labor regulations they're forced to abide by (but still, actively lobbying congress against), I lived in a perpetual state of anxiety, knowing I could get fired at any moment for something as simple as a mistake, losing a twenty dollar bill, and having conversations to that affect with coworkers was essentially the only kind of solace I got out of it - the understanding that I wasn't going through it alone.

However, the Memphis shooter worked for the post office, wherein, as a letter carrier, you *are* alone, literally, physically, and metaphorically. When I would try to initiate a conversation with a coworker about our working conditions, the absolute *best* response I could hope for was along the lines of

*'yeah, well we all had to do it at one point'* but would often get the *'new carriers/young people are just so lazy and ungrateful'*; the unspoken understanding that you and your coworkers all have to deal with the exact same problems is nearly nonexistent at the post office, and is especially not extended to new hires. Starting a job at the post office was the most isolating experience of my life and, as the last decade has shown us, isolation is proving to be one of the most damaging social phenomena to the American psyche, almost every mass shooter is reported to have been a *loner*.

I've come to a point where I feel obligated to reiterate, no matter how obvious the position may be, that I immediately and completely disagree with the Memphis shooter's actions. Ideally, labor disputes would all be solved before they occurred by extending the rights of employees and employing a more involved and powerful union base in all jobs everywhere. At work, when I feel pressured or disrespected by my employer, I simply follow their orders to the letter, doing everything asked of me, no matter how painfully tedious, taking twice as long as their expectations - which is exactly what a good union representative would have explained to the shooter, had they the access to union representation immediately and extensively.

Again, my point is not to justify the shooter or moralize his actions, rash and ultimately pointless (the union managed to get four managers, who never should've been anyone's manager, fired, except it took the lives of three people to do so) as they were. My point is to simply remind whomever may read this, that oftentimes the terms of one's employment can be just as violent and physically traumatizing as any true, physical violence. Autonomy in the workplace is at a steady decline around the world save for those lucky few with the means required for remote work with meaningless job titles like *'project personifier'* or something along those lines, as well as mental illness and the government's lack of ability to help the afflicted. These kinds of situations will keep happening until the world's governments finally put an end to predatory employment practices and prioritize social safety programs. Until then, we as a people need to do more, involve ourselves more in our unions or create them in our workplaces, and on a

more human level, reach out to those around us, even if it's something as simple as saying good morning.